

Curious Objects

This learning pack does not focus on specific objects in the Library's collections. Instead it uses the traditional story of Baba Yaga to encourage children to think creatively about unusual objects in any exhibition.

It can be used as part of a self-guided visit to Curious Objects, or in other museums or galleries.

Magical Objects – Key Stage 1: English

Contents of this learning pack

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Background information

Suggestions for retelling the Baba Yaga story

This story has been adapted by library staff from a traditional Russian folk tale to focus on three magical objects, each described by two adjectives.

We suggest collecting a range of objects and/or printed images and giving each one to a child. Ask the children to hold up their image or object when it is mentioned in the story. If you cannot find the objects listed, use the photos of them instead.

Objects: Blue silk scarf, Little wooden comb, Bright red ribbon, Pestle and mortar, Glass bottle.

All the children can join in the rhyming refrain which is printed at the end of the story text.

Retelling of the Baba Yaga Story

The story of Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Brave

Once, long ago, on the edge of a deep dark forest there lived a little girl named Vasilisa. She lived in a cottage with her father who loved her very much.

Vasilisa's father chopped down trees in the forest for firewood and hunted deer and trapped rabbits for them to eat. He sewed the animal skins into warm clothes, and each spring he travelled far away to sell them in the big town.

Vasilisa gathered mushrooms and berries in the forest, made bread from acorn flour and fished in the bright stream that ran beneath the trees.

She followed her father as he hunted, and knew all the paths in the woods for miles around their house, but she had to stay close to home when she was alone. Wolves roamed in the forest and could eat a little girl up in a moment.

One day, Vasilisa's father became ill. He lay in his bed, sweating and shaking. Vasilisa made him soup from dried mushrooms and rabbit, and gave him cold water from the stream.

After a week, her father was even weaker. He couldn't swallow his food and he didn't recognise Vasilisa anymore. She knew that if she didn't find a cure, her father would die.

That night, Vasilisa had a dream. A voice said to her:

In a chicken-legged house you will find the spell

To cure your father and make him well.

Follow the path at the end of your nose

To the heart of the forest where nobody goes.

Vasilisa was frightened when she woke. Her father had told her stories of Baba Yaga, an old witch who lived in a chicken-legged house in the forest. But Vasilisa knew that witches know spells, and she knew that nothing but magic would make her father better now.

Vasilisa wanted to leave her father some food, in case he got better while she was away. There was not much food left in the house for her to take on her journey to the heart of the forest, so Vasilisa just wrapped up a crust of bread with a little pat of butter. She took one rabbit bone with some meat left on it.

Vasilisa combed her hair with her little wooden comb and tied it with a bright red ribbon. She wrapped her blue silk scarf around her neck, kissed her father goodbye, and set off bravely into the dark wood.

All that day she walked on paths she knew, through the still trees. But without her father she was afraid of the wolves. In the evening she caught a fish in the stream and smoked it over a fire. She climbed up into a tree, tied herself to the branch with her scarf, and slept a little, watched over by the cold night stars.

The next day, Vasilisa walked so far into the woods that she no longer knew the way.

When she felt afraid, she repeated the words from her dream over and over as she walked.

In a chicken-legged house you will find the spell

To cure your father and make him well.

Follow the path at the end of your nose

To the heart of the forest where nobody goes.

That evening, Vasilisa saw lights shining ahead of her in the forest.

As she got closer, she saw that the lights were skulls on posts. She knew then that she was near the home of the witch. Vasilisa pulled one of the posts from the soft forest floor, and crept forward, lighting her path with the shining skull.

Soon she saw a strange house, hopping on its chicken legs. Around the house there was a fence made of bones. At the old metal gate, a huge tangled tree stood guard.

Vasilisa crept towards the house and pushed open the old metal gate.

But as she pushed it gave a loud C-R-E-A-K!

"Oh poor gate," said Vasilisa, "you need some grease to stop your squeak," and she took the little pat of butter and rubbed it into the hinges so the gate swung silently closed behind her.

Suddenly, a skinny brown dog came bounding towards her, barking ferociously.

"Oh poor dog, you look hungry," said Vasilisa and she took out the rabbit bone with a scrap of meat and gave it to him. The dog stopped barking, gave a wag of his tail and ran off with his bone.

Vasilisa walked up to the chicken-legged house and knocked on the door.

The door swung open and there was Baba Yaga herself.

Vasilisa gasped with fear, because the old witch was so big, so bad and so bony. But worst of all, Baba Yaga's mouth was full of sharp iron teeth.

"Who are you and what do you want?" snarled the red mouth and Vasilisa saw the iron teeth flash fire.

But Vasilisa was brave and determined, so she smiled at the witch and she said,

"Good evening Baba Yaga. My name is Vasilisa and I have come to ask if you have a spell that could help my sick father.

I came to find you because I had a dream that said:

In a chicken-legged house you will find the spell

To cure your father and make him well.

Follow the path at the end of your nose

To the heart of the forest where nobody goes."

Baba Yaga smiled a terrible smile with her iron teeth.

"Come in child. My old bones are weary and I could use some help around the house."

Baba Yaga hobbled over to a box in the corner, and pulled out a tiny glass bottle.

"Here is a potion that will cure your father. But in return you must stay here with me tonight and cook and clean for me, and then you can go back to your father in the morning."

Vasilisa was worried that her father might die while she cleaned the chicken-legged house, but it was deepest darkest night, and she couldn't walk home in the forest alone, because the wolves prowled in the dark.

So she thanked Baba Yaga and went into the chicken-legged house. First Vasilisa scrubbed the wooden floor and table, then she built up the fire, and then she began chopping onions for soup.

Baba Yaga went out into the forest, chucking quietly.

As soon as the witch left, a bony black cat jumped onto the kitchen table and licked Vasilisa's hand.

"Oh poor cat, you look hungry," said Vasilisa and she took out her crust of stale bread and fed it to the cat. When she had finished the cat jumped up onto Vasilisa's lap.

"Child, you must run, run as fast as you can, back along the path at the end of your nose, for Baba Yaga is planning to eat you with her iron teeth for her dinner."

Vasilisa thought of the wolves with their sharp teeth, but she was more afraid of Baba Yaga's wicked iron teeth. "I will run and run as fast as I can back along the path at the end of my nose, but what if Baba Yaga chases me?" she asked the cat.

"Take your scarf and your comb and if she comes after you, first throw your blue silk scarf and then your little wooden comb."

Vasilisa took the tiny glass bottle with the healing potion, thanked the cat, and ran down the steps of the chicken-legged house.

The skinny dog ran up to her and licked her hand and wagged its tail. The old metal gate opened silently to let Vasilisa pass.

But the huge tangled tree reached its branches down and caught hold of Vasilisa, and would not let her pass. Vasilisa thought for a moment, and she undid the bright red ribbon from her hair and tied it around the lowest branch. Then the tree released Vasilisa from the prison of branches and she ran and ran back along the path at the end of her nose.

Baba Yaga returned to the chicken-legged house. She was looking forward to dinner. It was years since she had eaten a tender little girl.

When she saw that the house was empty, she screamed at the bony black cat.

"Cat, cat! Where is she... why did you let her go? You should have scratched out her eyes and yowled to call me!"

But the cat gave a hiss and a spit, "For years and years I have served you, and yet you never gave me a single crumb from your plate. I had to live on the rats I could catch, and you use most of them in your spells. But Vasilisa gave me her own crust of bread."

Baba Yaga rushed out of the house on her long bony legs.

"Dog, dog! Where is she... why did you let her go? You should have bitten her hand and barked to call me."

But the skinny brown dog gave a howl and a growl, "For years and years I have served you, and yet you never gave me a single dry old bone. But Vasilisa gave me her own fresh rabbit bone with a scrap of meat."

Baba Yaga rushed down to the gate on her long bony legs.

"Gate, gate! Where is she... why did you let her go? You should have locked yourself shut and squeaked to warn me."

But the old metal gate gave a creak and a squeak, "For years and years I have served you, and yet you never gave me a single drop of oil. But Vasilisa gave me her own pat of sweet butter to grease my rusty hinges."

Out of the gate went Baba Yaga on her long bony legs!

"Birch tree, birch tree! Where is she... why did you let her go? You should have caught her in the tangle of your branches and held her for me."

But the leaves of the trees rustled and sighed, "For years and years I have served you, and yet you never gave me even a piece of string to decorate my branches. But Vasilisa gave us her own bright red ribbon, and made me feel beautiful."

Then Baba Yaga gave a terrible cry and jumped into her mortar. Taking up her great pestle she gave an enormous push and swoosh, swoosh, swoosh she chased through the forest after Vasilisa.

Vasilisa was running as fast as she could, following the lights of the skulls. She heard the noise swoosh, swoosh, swoosh behind her and saw Baba Yaga rushing closer and closer through the trees.

Remembering the cat's advice, Vasilisa threw her blue silk scarf down behind her and ran on.

The blue silk scarf turned into a great, deep river. Baba Yaga's stone mortar was too heavy to float across. The witch paced up and down on the bank of the magical river, gnashing her iron teeth. Then she called out:

I'll munch this girl, I'll crunch her liver

Come to me cows and drink this river!

Then Baba Yaga's herd of white cows ran down to the water and gulped and slurped it all up until they had drunk the river dry.

Baba Yaga was off again in her pestle and mortar, *swoosh, swoosh, swoosh*.

Vasilisa heard the noise *swoosh, swoosh, swoosh* behind her and saw Baba Yaga racing closer and closer through the trees.

Remembering the cat's advice, Vasilisa threw her little wooden comb down behind her and ran on. The teeth of the comb sprang to life, and each tooth became a thorn tree. Baba Yaga blundered into the forest of thorns and they tangled around her so she was trapped.

Baba Yaga was in a fury. With her iron teeth she started to bite her way through the trees. *Gnash and gnaw! Gnash and gnaw!* The trees fell all around her, but as she bit through each branch, ten more sprang up in its place, covered with thorns.

At last, exhausted, scratched and hungry, Baba Yaga gave up the chase and went back to her chicken-legged house in the heart of the forest where nobody goes.

And as for Vasilisa, she heard the gnashing and gnawing behind her but she ran on and on without looking back, all the long night, until she came to her father's house in the forest just as the sun was rising.

Vasilisa ran into her father's bedroom, full of fear that she would be too late.

Her father lay on the bed with his cheeks pale, his arms thin, and his eyes closed. Vasilisa saw his chest rising and falling slowly, and knew that there was still life in him.

She took the tiny glass bottle of Baba Yaga's potion, and poured it between her father's lips, saying:

In a chicken-legged house I found the spell

To cure my father and make him well.

I followed the path at the end of my nose

To the heart of the forest where nobody goes.

Vasilisa's father gave a great cough, and his cheeks turned red.

He gave another cough, and his thin arms were strong and muscular again.

He gave a third cough, and opened his eyes.

When he saw his little daughter, he wrapped her up in a huge bear hug and cried tears of joy.

Vasilisa and her father lived together happily on the edge of the deep dark forest.

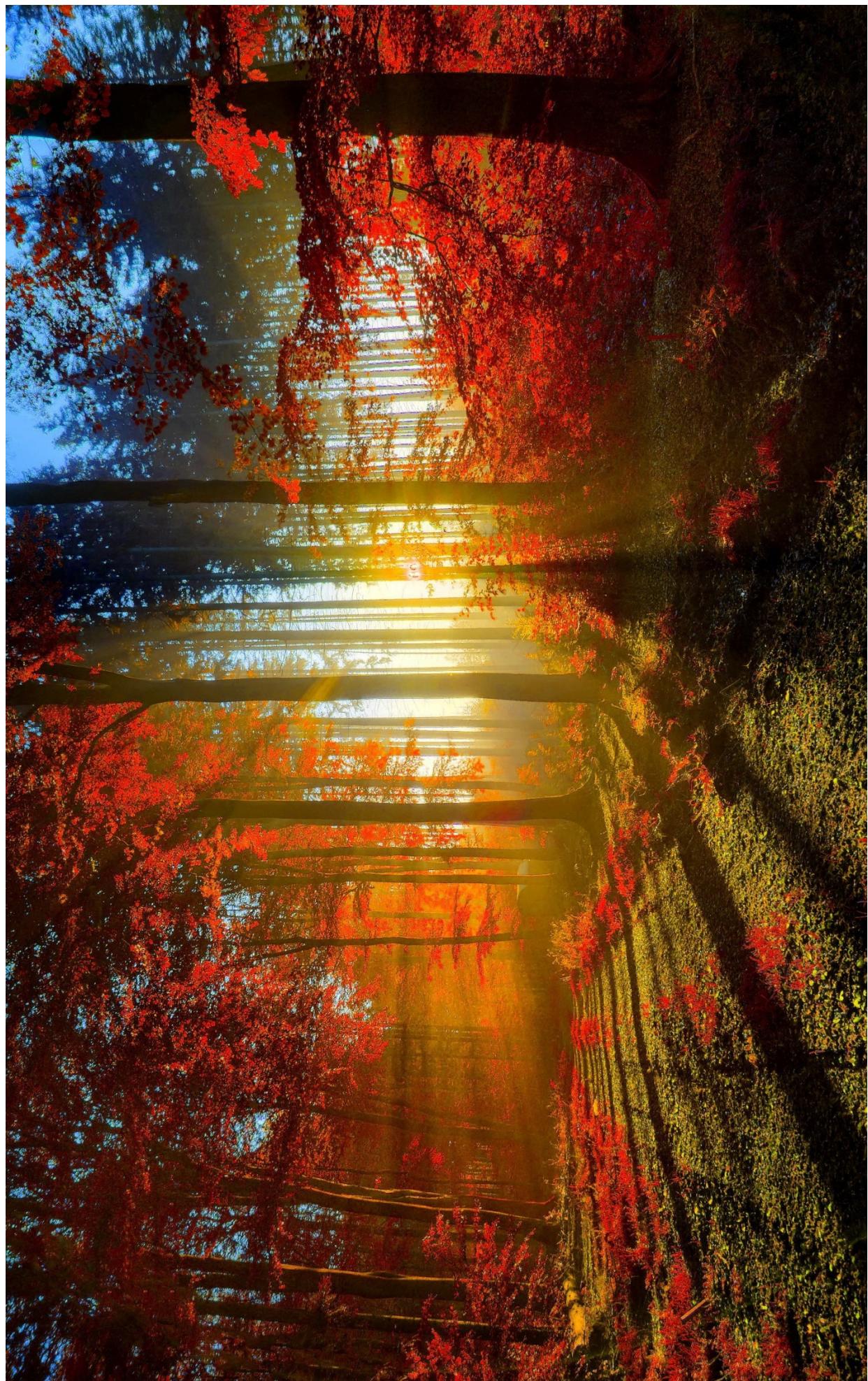
When she grew up, Vasilisa had many more adventures, and she became known as Vasilisa the brave.

Written by Rosie Sharkey, inspired by the retelling by Margaret Bateson-Hill, 2006. www.margaretbateson-hill.co.uk

Visual Aids













И. БИЛИБИН. 1900. ©











Visual aids: image credits

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- Silk scarf: www.lyst.com
- Wooden comb: www.startwoodworking.com
- Red ribbon: www.depositphotos.com
- Pestle and mortar: <http://zetouna.com>
- Bottle: <https://mysticalmoonstar.wordpress.com>

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